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This event took place at the Sandhills Studio and Art Gallery during NAIDOC Week 2006 to showcase some of Pamela Croft's latest work. Sandhills Studio and Art Gallery, Keppel Sands, Australia. 9th July 2006

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Finding Aboriginal Australian History in a Shoebox

Bronwyn Fredericks & Pamela Croft

Sandhills Studio and Art Gallery

Keppel Sands
Australia

09th July 2006

2006 NAIDOC Activity at the Sandhills Studio and Art Gallery

Introduction

In 2007 the Australian State of Queensland will celebrate '100 years of women's voting'. All women in Queensland have voted for 100 years except Aboriginal Australian women who gained the right to vote in 1967. As part of the celebrations, a Women's History Shoebox Project was undertaken where Queensland women were asked to decorate a shoebox with items they had stored, collected, lost and found that represented them and their histories. Australian Aboriginal woman artist Dr Pamela Croft participated in the project.

Dr Pamela Croft lives and works from her studio in Keppel Sands on the Capricorn Coast Australia. Within broader Australia, this region is marketed as the 'Beef Capital of Australia'. It is also at the southern end of one of the world's greatest wonders; the World Heritage listed Great Barrier Reef. Croft has practised as a visual artist since the mid-1980s and uses both: Aboriginal Australian and Western techniques, education and style to tell the stories based on identity, sense of place, and the effects of colonisation. She was the first Aboriginal Australian to gain a Doctor of Visual Arts in Australia.

The Interview

I interviewed Dr Pamela Croft in her studio at Keppel Sands on 06/06/06. We talked about her participation in this project and her artwork. The formal introduction by Dr Pamela Croft is not just information about her cultural location, but in line with Aboriginal Australian protocol.

Dr Pamela Croft [PC]: I am a Kooma woman of the Uralarai people of South West Queensland (Figure 1). I grew up in the Brisbane area and have worked and travelled in various parts of Australia and overseas. I now live and work from my studio in Keppel Sands on the Capricorn Coast in Central Queensland, Australia. I give honour to the Darumbal dreaming ancestors and acknowledge the Darumbal people as the Traditional Owners of the Capricorn Coast. I additionally give honour and acknowledgment to the Woppaburra people who are the Traditional Owners of the Islands and waters off the Capricorn Coast mainland. It is important for me to recognise that the site of my home and studio and where the majority of my recent works have been carried out is within Darumbal Country and Woppaburra Country.

Bronwyn Fredericks [BF]: Could you describe some of the main narratives that are contained within your artworks?

PC: Many of my narratives are land-centred. From the position of an Aboriginal woman, I try to portray the importance of tradition, recognition of ancestors, respect for uniqueness in spiritual expression, facilitation of an understanding within the contexts of history and culture, a sense of place, connections to family and community, commitment to educational and social transformation that recognises and empowers the inherent strength of Aboriginal peoples and cultures with challenges to non-Aboriginal people to truly listen and absorb in order to move to a place of understanding of our world.

In trying to reflect these narratives I encapsulate “*bothways*” philosophy and methodology into my work. I think that this allows me to create alternative story sites for identity and displacement, histories, sense of place and the effects of colonisation. Bothways philosophy and methodology utilises Aboriginal and Western techniques, education and style to tell the stories. I use this to show that people are different in terms of being human. I try to show these differences and use some of them rather than out-rightly reject them. There are also some relationships, connections and disjunctions that are shared by both Aboriginal and Western domains and by using bothways philosophy and methodology, I am able to inform processes and techniques to position visual art as an educational experience and as a tool for healing, for both myself and others. It is a way that simultaneously recognises whilst not privileging one over the other. Using this bothways approach is extremely powerful. It is also an empowering methodology for me.

BF: Recently you participated in the Queensland Women’s Shoebox History Collection. What was this about?

PC: All Women in Queensland except Aboriginal Women recently celebrated 100 years of voting. Aboriginal women in Queensland were given the vote from the Australian people in 1967. To celebrate the vote a Women’s History Shoebox Project was undertaken. Women were asked to get a shoebox and decorate it as they wished and to fill it with items, lost, found, memorabilia, photographs and bits and pieces that was significant to them and their history.

We also had to explore the history of women in our family and when they first voted. We had to find what was in many cases this lost information. My birth mother was the first generation of women in my family to vote. Her mother (my grandmother) passed away when she was only 9 years old. My adopted parents did not vote do to their religious beliefs. I believe it is important for people to have the choice to vote. In Australia it is compulsory to vote. Unfortunately, I don’t believe that Aboriginal people are represented in the political arena and this is an area where Indigenous people are active in trying to make changes to the system for entering into elective government positions.

BF: Tell me about the list of ten things inside the box.

PC: The Project asked us to name the 10 most significant influences in our lives. When I reflected on my life, they were:

1. Aboriginal culture, history and laws and my ancestral country in South Western Queensland – Kooma clan of the Uralarai people.
2. My adopted parents, my sons, my husband, family, friends and colleagues.
3. My farm and environment of Keppel Sands.
4. My career as a visual artist and academic/educator.
5. My western education journey at university gaining a BA (fine arts) 1988.
6. Doctorate of Visual Art 2003.

7. My initiation into understanding and implementing a Bothways, Land-centred philosophy into my life after living in the Northern Territory, Australia. I have been privileged to journey extensively around Australia and the world and the experiences and communication exchanges with other people.
8. My pets (dogs and birds).
9. Gardening and landscaping.
10. Hunting and gathering at the beach and in my surrounding environment.

BF: Pamela it is obvious that you have undertaken a hunting and gathering process in preparing your shoebox. There is evidence of this in the symbolism and use of salvaged and found objects, and items that would be generally regarded as Aboriginal and Australian memorabilia. For example, there are badges and paintbrushes and photographs. Can you explain the symbolism behind your shoebox?

PC: The magenta and white ochre paint represents Kooma clan Country and people. The Aboriginal meeting place symbol on the back of the box represents home. Kooma is my ancestral place (Figure 1). Ochre represents our life-blood and is used for painting, healing and ceremony. The blue and yellow represent my property, the 'Sandhills', and the surrounding environment where I live – Darumbal Country and Woppaburra waters, Country. The female figure is my logo and I apply this to all my artwork. The paintbrushes represent my career and passion (Figure 2). The badges draw attention to Aboriginal activism and that which I have been involved within over the years. It was lovely remembering that which was of the past in looking through all the different badges. Wunndurra my dog is represented on the box, his footprints and the symbol I used for him. He recently passed away and I am still grieving my loss, he was my best mate for 15 years. He lived up to his name, which means 'warrior'. There is a collage painting surrounding my family photos, which I call mud maps and describe the tidal environment where I live. The buttons, threads, and beads describe my contemporary enjoyment of modern life. Gum nuts, and feathers represent my love of nature, and Aboriginal culture (Figure 2). The feathers are from my cockatiels, owl (wisdom), peacock (to be proud as an Aboriginal woman), parrots, eagle (my totem) emu (my family totem) and chooks who lay my family many fresh and delicious eggs (Figure 3).

BF: What did being part of the project mean to you?

PC: Being part of this project offered me a means of retelling and remaking history. Through something as simple as a shoebox I was able to expose the multiple layers of the experiences and impacts of trauma of colonisation and displacement, questions and concepts of identity and whiteness, and outline personal and collective stories and cultural interpretations. I in a way reclaimed part of my individual story but also helped retell the communal story of Aboriginal Australian peoples. I also found a number of stories that weren't lost in a sense. They were just put away for a while. I wanted to be part of this project to tell my story and the story of other Aboriginal peoples. I don't want the history of struggle to vote and our voting issues as Aboriginal people to be lost.

Dr Pamela Croft's shoebox and the other shoeboxes that were part of the project have been turned into the Queensland Women's History Shoebox Collection and will displayed later this year at the Queensland Museum in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.



Figure 1. Side of Shoebox. Vote badge and wording. (Photo by Pamela Croft).



Figure 2. Bottom of Shoebox. Aboriginal Symbol for meeting place. (Photo by Pamela Croft).

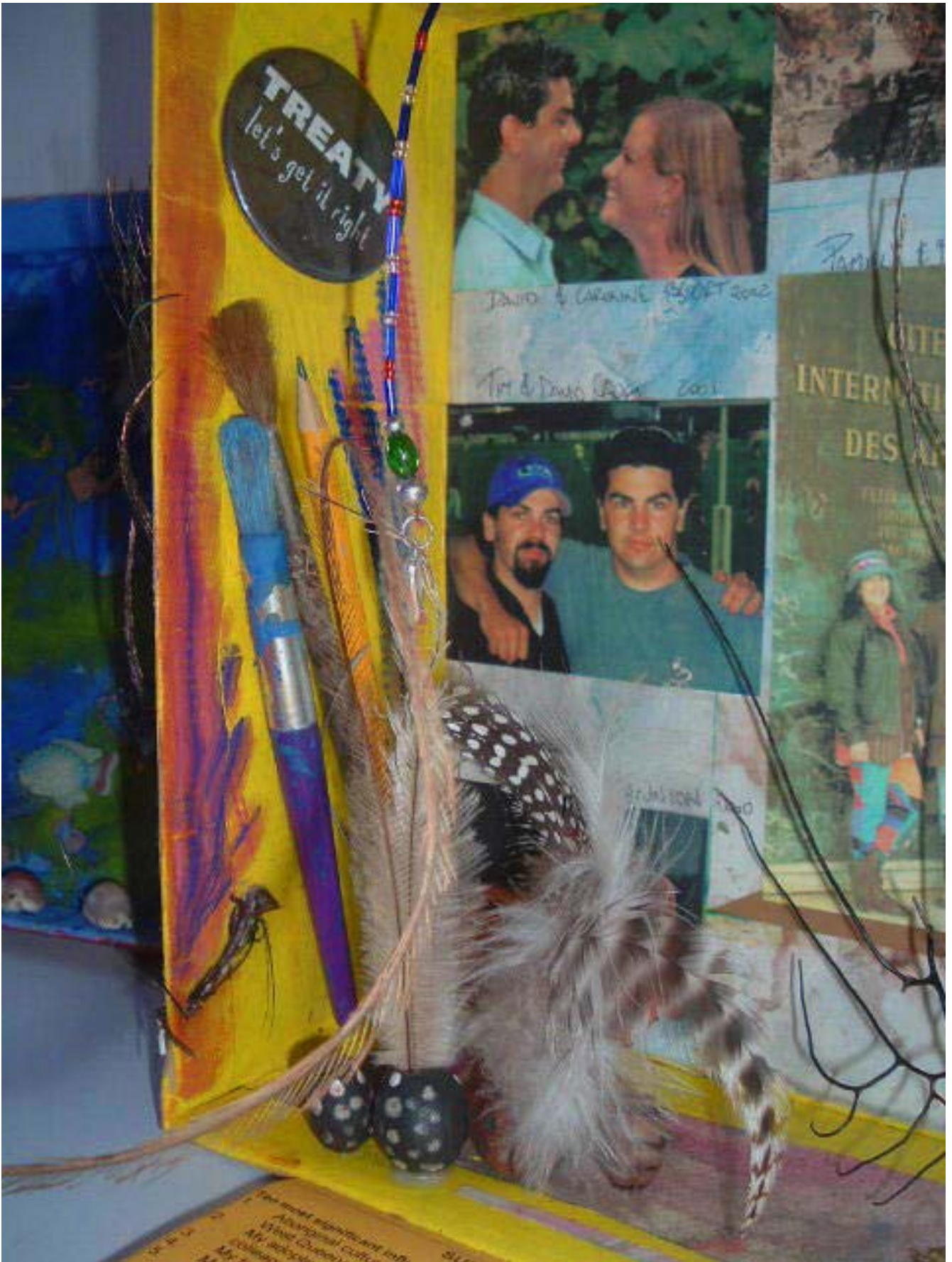


Figure 3. Inside Shoebox. (Photo by Pamela Croft).



Figure 4. Side of Pamela Croft's Shoebox (Photo by Pamela Croft)